ISSUE BRIEF

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NUCLEAR MODERNIZATION OR ARMS RACE? REASSESSING STRATEGIC STABILITY AFTER THE DEMISE OF INF AND THE NEW START CONSTRAINTS

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The post-Cold War arms control has lost its binding framework. The U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019,[1] and the official expiration of the New START Treaty in February 2026 has left a governance vacuum.[2] This vacuum strongly favors qualitative nuclear modernization over transparency and restraint. With the elimination of New START's legally binding limitations on deployed strategic warheads and the on-site verification regime, the last bilateral constraint of New START on deployed strategic warheads and delivery systems has disappeared.[3] The resulting uncertainty between the parties increases the risks of capability-driven competition. Without new and technological awareness cooperative measures, the modernization might turn into a multidomain arms race that erodes crisis stability. Practical policy steps to give new impetus to arms control, such as substituting modular, technology-sensitive arms control for the traditional functional style,

1 "US Withdraws from Arms Control Agreement with Russia," *Al Jazeera*, August 2, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/8/2/inf-treaty-us-withdraws-from-arms-control-agreement-with-russia.

2 "End of New START: Short- and Medium-Term Options," Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP), January 14, 2026, https://vcdnp.org/end-of-new-start/.

3 "Nukes Without Limits: A New Era After the End of New START," Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org/articles/nukes-without-limits-a-new-era-after-the-end-of-new-start.

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improving verification technology and data-sharing, providing for crisis hotlines, and achieving inclusive regional transparency, will bring about renewed predictability.

INF Treaty (1987): The INF Treaty of 1987, signed between the United States and the Soviet Union, eliminated ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of 500 to 5500km.[4] It had also introduced detailed verification measures, one major Cold War arms control milestone.

New START Treaty (2010): This treaty was signed in 2010 between the U.S. and Russia, which allows each side to have warheads on deployed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), Submarine-launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers deployed to nuclear missions.[5]

The official withdrawal of the United States' and the Soviet Union's forces bound under the INF Treaty in 2019 did away with the legal restrictions on ground-launched intermediate-range missiles. New START, the final bilateral, strategic warhead/strategic delivery system cap, formally expired on 5th of February 2026. Although Russia suspended its participation in New START in February 2023,[6] due to which inspections had also decayed, and with the treaty's legal expiration date, the potential of this treaty turns a frail political situation into an open institutional gap. Verification visits, on-site inspections, and mandated data exchanges no longer work on the authority of treaties, even though Moscow has publicly stated it will continue to comply with limits so long as Washington does the same[7] but all such conditional promises are political, not treaty-bound, and are therefore precarious. The net effect here is a break in the conduct of confidence-building routines at the very moment that modernization is leading to more ambiguous and faster capabilities.

The New Era of Nuclear Modernization and Topology

The removal and absence of official restraints (INF and New START) on weapons production and deployment provide an open-ended competition and struggle to dominate over each other in terms of technology and weapons. The modernization is not limited to Russia and the U.S.; rather, in

4 "The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance," Arms Control Association, last reviewed August 2019, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-inf-treaty-glance.

5 "New START at a Glance," Arms Control Association, last reviewed December 2024, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/new-start-glance.

6 "Putin: Russia Suspends Participation in Last Remaining Nuclear Treaty with US," *Reuters*, February 21, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-russia-suspends-participation-last-remaining-nuclear-treaty-with-us-2023-02-21/.

7 "Russia Says it Won't Breach Limits of Expired Nuclear Treaty If US Does Same," *Reuters*, February 11, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-it-wont-breach-limits-expired-nuclear-treaty-if-us-does-same-2026-02-11/.

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contemporary times, the competition or race has expanded to China, India, North Korea, and so forth. Modernization programmes in the United States, Russia, and China emphasize survivability, precision, and new delivery concepts rather than simply restoring the Cold War stockpiles. The U.S. is fielding a new triad backbone of Columbia-class SSBNs, the B-21 bomber, and GBSD/modernized ICBMs paired with updates to NC3 and life-extension programmes.[8] Russia is deploying systems in terms of "strategic" and "asymmetric," such as Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles, the Sarmat heavy ICBM, and maritime/undersea concepts like Poseidon, which aim at penetration and survivability rather than numerical growth per se.[9] China's military build-up is rapid and multi-vector in the form of new silo fields, road-mobile and solid-propellant ICBMs, and a fast-growing warhead stockpile that U.S. officials estimated at over 600 operational warheads as of mid-2024, with projections toward the low-to-mid thousands by the 2030s if current trends continue.[10]

What matters strategically is that modernization produces new capabilities, hypersonic manoeuvrability, dual-capable long-range systems, resilient undersea weapons, and AI-enabled command tools that blur the lines between offensive and defensive postures and between conventional and nuclear effects. This shifts incentives; as a result, states prioritize first-strike denial, deception, or "usable" options, increasing instability even without larger warhead inventories.

The Cold War arms control was primarily the U.S.-Soviet bilateralism. Today's nuclear order is a triangle (the U.S., Russia, and China) with several regional actors (India, Pakistan, and DPRK) outside classical frameworks. China's rise complicates any deal that excludes Beijing; legacy treaties are ill-suited to govern hypersonics, non-nuclear dual-use systems, or AI and cyber interactions. The arms control toolkit needs to evolve from rigid ceilings toward *modular*, technology-sensitive, and multilateral mechanisms. Thus, the termination of the New START will not only impact two states, but it will trail the strategic Chain.

Why is Strategic Stability at Risk?

The termination of the New START Treaty in February 2026 will have immediate and cascading consequences for strategic stability. The termination of New START created governance issues, due

8 *U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces: Background, Developments, and Issues*, CRS Report RL33640 (Congressional Research Service, updated July 13, 2021), https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/RL/PDF/RL33640/RL33640.66.pdf.

9 Timothy Wright, "Russia's New Strategic Nuclear Weapons: A Technical Analysis and Assessment," *IISS Online Analysis*, June 16, 2022, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/06/russias-new-strategic-nuclear-weapons-a-technical-analysis-and-assessment.

10 *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, December 18, 2024), https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF.

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to which it would give rise to the following concerns in the form of a verification gap, no legal guarantee, risk of acceleration, and chances of proliferation.

- *Verification gap:* It creates a huge verification gap with the end of treaty-mandated on-site inspections and routine data exchanges, eliminating independent means to audit deployed strategic forces and upping intelligence uncertainty and worst-case bias.

- *Political promises, not legal guarantees:* What Moscow and Washington had said, as well as even commentators, show conditional adherence and political rhetoric that are not enough to substitute for a verifiable treaty. This increases the likelihood of asymmetric interpretation and reactive measures.

- *Acceleration risk:* With the absence of formal limits, there are incentive structures between demonstration of capability and deployment, dangers of hedging/ escalating capability, especially so for highly ambiguous and high-risk areas such as hypersonics/dual-use delivery systems/NC3.

- *Proliferation:* It drives regional proliferation of ripple effects, alliance pressure due to which partnering states would be dragged to acquire more capabilities or assurances, and leads to greater proliferation of modern technology or weapons and deployment risks beyond the U.S.-Russia dyad. It constricts diplomatic space in it, which could potentially turn treaty-bound behaviours previously into conditional political pledges that are much easier to abrogate or misinterpret.

Together, these effects make it more likely that miscalculation, inadvertent escalation, and irreversible capability races could happen. Thus, the above-discussed concerns would eventually signal a potential threat to strategic stability in four causal mechanisms.

1. *Transparency loss and worst-case bias:* Without routine inspections and data exchanges, states assume adversaries prepare worst-case capabilities, prompting pre-emptive counters. The suspension of New START curtailed on-site verification and data flows that previously lowered uncertainty between the U.S. and Russia.[11] The termination of New START transformed the routine uncertainty into structural and justified uncertainty because political promises single-handedly cannot be an alternative to verified data.

11 Shannon Bugos, "Russia Suspends New START," *Arms Control Today*, March 2023, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-03/news/russia-suspends-new-start.

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2. Decision-time compression: Hypersonics, faster sensors, and AI-assisted warning can sharply reduce the time leaders and commanders have to evaluate ambiguous events, making rapid escalation more likely when alarms are ambiguous. Analysis and expert workshops increasingly warn that AI-NC3 interactions can shorten human deliberation windows.[12]

3. *Dual-use and domain mingling:* Modern strike systems and space/cyber effects are often dual-use, in which an adversary cannot easily tell whether a malfunctioning satellite, a cyber disruption, or a missile flight is a conventional tactical strike or nuclear preparation. This ambiguity raises the probability of miscalculation.[13]

4. *Regional spill overs:* major-power modernization reshapes incentives for regional nuclear states. India-Pakistan dynamics, for example, are sensitive to perceived shifts in survivability and first-strike profiles, increasing pressure for counter-modernization absent regional confidence measures.[14]

Collectively, these mechanisms mean that the absence of New START or any legally binding treaty leads to modernization that could simultaneously increase each state's sense of deterrent credibility while diminishing collective strategic stability, an evaluative paradox that requires policy action. The absence of any legal binding framework would potentially fuel the modernization, competition, and chances of escalation.

A Route to Stable Deterrence

Three broad policy moves can convert competitive modernization into managed deterrence:

1. *Strategic Stability Dialogue 2.0:* Recreate continuous, high-level trilateral (the U.S., Russia, and China) and complementary regional dialogues focused on behaviour, thresholds, and incident management rather than only numbers. These forums need to include technical working groups on verification tech and NC3 risk reduction.

2. *Modular and tech-sensitive arms control:* Modular, tech-sensitively Arms control proposes that small, verifiable agreements be negotiated that cover specified areas of risk. Examples include transparency in hypersonic flight tests, restrictions on the rapid deployment of

12 *Artificial Intelligence, and Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications: Current Status and Future Risks*, June 2025 (Washington, DC: Federation of American Scientists, 2025, https://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/June2025_AIxNC3_FAS.pdf.

13 "Hypersonic Weapons," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Nuclear Policy Programme, https://carnegieendowment.org/programs/nuclear-policy/hypersonic-weapons.

14 Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "Increasing Role of Nuclear Weapons: Global and Regional Trends," ISSI, Issue Brief July 9, 2024, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/IB_Ghazala_July_9_2024.pdf.

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certain types of dual-capable weapons, and moratoria on new destabilizing systems. These agreements would be coupled with fast monitoring capabilities such as commercial satellite imagery, open-source monitoring, and AI analytics. A "piecemeal" approach is more politically feasible and may be updated quickly as technology changes.

3. *Operational risk reduction:* Institutionalize crisis hotlines in domains - space, cyber, and nuclear. It also means automatic sharing of data in the event of unusual launches and joint simulation exercises. These steps help create a habit of communication and test the hardiness of nuclear command, control, and communications. They reduce the likelihood that a situation involving some ambiguity will cause escalation.

Analytically, the shift is from counting warheads to dealing with mixes of capabilities and behaviour. This framing focuses on incentives and crisis dynamics in which policy can actually change things.

Conclusion

The termination of legally binding treaties will eventually force states to engage in modernization or an arms race. But it is important to note that nuclear modernization is not by itself necessarily an arms race. In some cases, better survivability can help stabilize the situation of deterrence by reducing incentives for preemption. However, the loss of institutional capacity today makes modernization more likely to generate greater suspicion between one another, accelerate decision cycles, and generate regional escalation. Policy will decide the difference - whether countries seek to pursue secretive capability increases or commit themselves to technology-aware cooperation. A pragmatic, modular arms control package coupled with operational risk-reduction is the best way to ensure that modernization remains adaptive in one of two choices: adaptive or ad hoc.

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